

Women Build Relationships

Tanzania 2004

Romans 1: 8-11 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because the whole world is hearing about your faith. God is my witness that what I say is true—the God whom I serve with all my heart by preaching the Good News about his Son. God knows that I remember you every time I pray. I ask that God in his good will may at last make it possible for me to visit you now. For I want very much to see you, in order to share a spiritual blessing with you to make you strong. What I mean is that both you and I will be helped at the same time, you by my faith and I by yours.

Rooted in this scripture, six women journeyed this past summer to our companion synod, the Eastern and Coastal Diocese (ECD) of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam, Africa. The women went to Africa on a 'mission building trip' of sorts. No, they did not build schools or libraries. They did not do 'hands on' medical mission work. But they did go to Africa to build. They traveled to Tanzania to 'share a spiritual blessing,' to build relationships with the women of the congregations in our companion synod. Ask any one of these women, Cindy Cowan, Doris Dubord, Luanne Skrenes, Ruth Snyder Ardith Frisk or Pastor Bonny Kinnunen from Ohio and they will tell you that they 'were helped at the same time' by the Africans, as the scripture says. The people of Africa have much to share with us and teach us as they have a deep passion for their faith. To quote Ardith, "anyone who doubts there is a God or doubts their faith needs to travel to Africa!"

The trip began in the Arusha Region near Mount Kilimanjaro, the headquarters location of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT). There the delegation learned about the Church of Africa, the work of the women's groups in the congregations, and the challenges facing the ELCT and its people.

Also site visited was the Selian Lutheran Hospital. As with many other institutions and offices within the ELCT, each workday begins with devotions, singing praises to God, and prayer. Here we had the privilege of visiting with the patients, a man who had been very ill and was now ready for discharge, parents in the inpatient pediatric unit, hospitalized women, one who was very sick and dying of AIDS. And we had the thrill of seeing a baby just born! Selian Lutheran Hospital is a very progressive (by African standards) hospital with in patient units, clinics, AIDS clinics, education, and hospice, and parenting education.

The Mwangaza Teacher's Center is a product of the partnership between the ELCA and the ELCT. 'Mwangaza,' means 'enlightenment.' The group visited this place where teachers in church-managed secondary schools study to develop their professional skills towards a more student-centered educational environment. Through short-term teacher exchanges, teams of Tanzanian and US teachers plan and facilitate seminars throughout Tanzania. Five teachers from Tanzania have been a part of this exchange in our synod.

The national game and safari parks are in the Arusha region. On the way to the Ngorongoro Crater Wildlife Park the group had the rare opportunity to visit a Maasai village to learn about their culture. The Maasai are a nomadic people who herd their cattle across the plains of Africa. They are a very private people. We were welcomed into the village by song, invited into their mud and cow dung huts to visit in their "living rooms," played with the children, and visited the school where the children counted to fifty in English! The chief of the tribe was proud to inform us

that his tribe was Christian!

This was day three of our trip. At the close of the day, Pastor Bonny told us, "If the trip were to end today, it would have well been worth the \$3600.00!" But those of us who had traveled to Africa before told her, "Wait, the best is yet to come!" After this, almost every day, someone would say, "The BEST has come!"

This "best" was rooted in the scripture reading from Paul in his letter to the Romans, the sharing of the faith to make us strong. While in Dar es Salaam, we awoke each morning to hear a choir practicing at Azania Front, the Lutheran Cathedral across the parking lot from Luther House where we stayed. Our group had a very full and busy itinerary of visiting churches, meeting with women's groups, hearing choirs, taking part in the daily devotions of the diocese, and visiting the slave museums to hear the heart wrenching stories of the slave trade.

The diocese was eager to show us both the rich and growing congregations as well as the poor and very rural churches where people have to walk for miles for water. We visited schools both public and private, traveling to Kisarawe School to see the newly completed library. The children of Mtoni Dioconal Center, an ECD boarding school for mentally handicapped children, won the hearts of each of us.

We toured a hospital, 'Muhumbili Regional Medical Center' with its meager surroundings, a place where the patients had only the absolute bare necessities.

This was a place where it seemed there was little hope. But our African friends reminded us that this place was full of hope. That God was ever present. That they heal people there and without this place, people would die.

Mrs. Anna Mkapa, the wife of the Tanzanian president welcomed us into her office to share with us about a charitable organization she founded and operates, "Equal Opportunities for All Trust Fund." This organization advocates for the people of Tanzania to enable all to attain a better life for them especially the poor and disadvantaged. Mrs. Mkapa is an active, dedicated Lutheran.

We were honored to present a check of over \$3000.00 to the Mkuza Womens Center from the women of our Northern Great Lakes synod and Ohio to furnish the rooms in their dormitory. Mkuza is an ECD 'school' where women learn basic skills like sewing and gardening to help them to be better contributing members of society. Here we planted trees as a sign of the unity between our synods and of working together.

The Church in Tanzania also supports SEBA, a businesswomen's association where women learn skills and entrepreneurship to help them to be contributing partners in society in Africa. Here women also learn about life skills and awareness of HIV/AIDS. The women's group from the NGLS had chance to attend a celebration here and learn about this ministry. The Ambassador of Finland to Tanzania was also present that day.

We visited our companion congregations where greetings were delivered from the synod and from the NGLS congregations. It was in these congregations that we saw baptisms, took part in ribbon cutting ceremonies, lead devotions, heard superb choirs, were handed chickens as a gift at the offering auction, and joined a pastor on home visits to the sick and homebound. The final Sunday we were in Tanzania, Pastor Bonny preached with a simultaneous interpretation.

It was here in Africa where we all learned that a smile is universal, that no matter the language, we can all pray together. We were reminded that this is a small world as we sang with the Africans "Blessed Assurance" and "Nearer My God to Thee." All

six of us left Africa feeling like we had been helped beyond words by the faith of our sisters in Christ in the Eastern & Coastal Diocese of Tanzania. It is our prayer that the Africans, too, felt that we too shared a spiritual blessing to make them strong. Bwana Asifewe! Praise the Lord! AMEN!
Luanne Skrenes